

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY
& COMMERCE

COMMERCE, TRADE AND CONSUMER PROTECTION
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH



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JOHN BARROW

12TH DISTRICT OF GEORGIA

April 11, 2011

Hon. Fred Upton
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Cliff Stearns
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight
2306 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Henry Waxman
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2204 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Diana DeGette
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight
2335 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairmen and Ranking Members:

In the wake of Google, Inc.'s, recent settlement with the Federal Trade Commission over having engaged in deceptive and intrusive practices with their Google Buzz function, I am writing to request that the Committee on Energy and Commerce convene an investigative hearing to assess the full weight and impact of Google's consumer privacy standards. While I have no doubt that internet search technology has made our respective online experiences more fruitful, we can't afford to allow continued advances in Internet functions to invade our online privacy.

As you're aware, Google launched the Buzz social network in 2010 as a component of its Gmail webmail service. Gmail users were led to believe that they had the option of choosing whether or not they wanted to join the network, but were met with inconspicuous opt-out and leave functions, and ineffective privacy settings. In addition, Google automatically used consumer's e-mail address books to create contact lists for Buzz and then publicly disclosed the names of these private contacts by posting this information online. Spurred by consumer outcry, Google modified Buzz to address customer complaints, but for many the damage was already done.

In another incident, last year Google acknowledged that their Street View cars had downloaded unsecured data from private WiFi networks, including e-mails and passwords, while taking photos for Google Maps. In May of 2010, members of our Committee contacted the FTC regarding this incident – known as “Wi-Spy” – to learn how this data breach occurred and how many consumers were affected. Unfortunately, we received no response from Google, and the FTC dropped its investigation before these questions were addressed.

In yet another incident earlier this year, Google gathered sensitive personal data about children participating in the launch of its annual children's artwork competition, "Doodle for Google." This information included partial social security numbers, dates of birth, city of birth, and street address and telephone information, of children participating in the contest. Google did not stop asking for the last four digits of the participating child's social security number until after it was discovered that this was going on.

Due to the frequency of these privacy breaches, and the handling of personal data by Google, it is of the utmost importance that the Committee hold an investigative hearing on Google's privacy standards. It is my hope that such a hearing will facilitate a constructive dialogue on online privacy issues that will be mutually beneficial to Google, consumers, and the Internet search technology community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Barrow". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John Barrow